

NEW KNOWLEDGE about Bulgaria

This briefing note highlights NEW KNOWLEDGE about Bulgaria.
We present here new knowledge and key messages for policy makers and civil society.

On-going project

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ACCOMMODATING ETHNIC, RELIGIOUS AND CULTURAL DIVERSITY IN BULGARIA

When Bulgaria appeared on the political map of Europe in 1878, its population consisted of a large variety of ethnic, linguistic, religious and cultural communities. The state did not always treat this diversity in a tolerant and respectful manner. Quite the contrary, in certain periods fierce and highly intolerant policies against different ethno-religious minorities were employed. Their ultimate goal was forced assimilation and erasure of differences between various Bulgarian ethno-religious communities.

The post-1989 democratisation brought about not just an end to intolerant practices and policies, but in many areas lead to genuine respect and recognition. At present, the principle of equal treatment of all citizens regardless of their ethnicity or religion is guaranteed by the Bulgarian constitution, numerous laws and various international treaties that the country is a party to.

These legal arrangements have enabled the practical implementation of numerous measures and activities through which various minorities can genuinely maintain and develop their culture, religion, language and other identity markers. Minorities have their own religious temples, cultural associations, media, and non-governmental organisations.

In the ACCEPT PLURALISM project, we investigated how ethnic, religious and cultural diversity is accommodated in two very important areas: **education** and **political life**.

- In **education**, we examined the challenges faced in education by Roma children, and the ways in which religious diversity is accommodated in schools throughout the country.
- In **politics**, we studied the political participation of the Roma population and the voting rights of Bulgarian-Turkish dual citizens.

In our analysis, we considered discourses and practices of dealing with diversity in Bulgaria on several levels. We looked at the institutional and legal framework and the position of state actors; public opinion tendencies and predispositions; as well as the actual situation on the ground.

Evaluation of discourses and practices in our case studies:

	Institutional and legal framework	Practical situation	Public discourses
Education of Roma children	Acceptance and recognition	Intolerance	Declarative recognition, actual intolerance
Religious diversity in schools	Between tolerance and acceptance / recognition	Predominantly tolerance with incidents of intolerance	Suspensions and intolerance towards Islam
Political participation and representation of Roma	(Conditional) intolerance	Tolerance	Indifference
Voting rights of Bulgarian-Turkish dual citizens	Intolerance	(Limited) intolerance	Intolerance

EDUCATION OF ROMA CHILDREN

A notable distance exists between the principles laid down in Bulgaria's institutional and legal framework, the actual situation on the ground and public discourses on the subject. Various strategies and action plans with clearly formulated goals and measures aimed at recognition and respect of diversity have been adopted in order to fully integrate Roma into Bulgarian society, while respecting their unique culture and identity. However, little progress has been achieved to date and the limited success that can be noted is mostly due to the work of non-governmental organisations.

Desegregation exists mainly on paper and segregated education continues to be the norm across the country. Most Roma children continue to visit schools where they cannot interact with children from other ethnicities and where the quality of education is low. Desegregation is most often practised as bussing of Roma children from the Roma neighbourhood (or ghetto) to an "integrated" school (usually located a considerable distance away) and back. This has led to the appearance of secondary segregation (the Roma children segregated inside the desegregated school into a "Roma-only" class) and "white flight" (Bulgarian parents transfer their children to classes or schools that do not admit "too many" Roma children).

In this context, attempts at desegregation have actually led to more manifestations of intolerance. Society at large seems to be characterised by two conflicting positions. There is on the one hand a declarative support for desegregation and integration, and on the other an actual preference for continued segregation and isolation of Roma. **Integration is thus supported in principle, but society expects this process to occur behind the high walls of parallel coexistence.**

RELIGIOUS DIVERSITY IN SCHOOLS

A rather similar situation characterises also the relationship between education and religious diversity in Bulgaria. The Law for Public Education clearly defines education as secular and prohibits any privileges or restrictions on the ground of religion. Religious communities can set up their own schools and there is no legislation prohibiting wearing of religious symbols in schools. The legal framework can be positioned between tolerance and

acceptance/recognition, as it respects the religious diversity of pupils and gives them the possibility to maintain and develop their religious and cultural identity even though the secularity of education is underlined. In practice, only two courses (Religion – Orthodoxy and Religion – Islam) have been introduced into the curriculum to date. Other religions are not studied due to a small number of potential students and the lack of qualified teachers.

However, the provision of Islamic religious education is not without problems. The number of schools where Islam is studied has been steadily decreasing since 2000. In recent years, several **Muslim religious teachers were subject to institutional harassment and were investigated by security services for alleged links with radical Islamic organisations.** There have also been several cases of girls wearing Muslim headscarves who were prevented from visiting their schools by the head teachers with the excuse that their attire was in violation of internal rules regarding the prescribed school uniform.

Thus, **while in general the practical situation regarding religious diversity in schools is predominantly tolerant, intolerant incidents – mainly directed against Muslim practices – have been on the rise in the recent years.** Beneath the declarative support for proper confessional instruction of both main religions (the Orthodox Christianity and Islam), there is a deep suspicion that radical Islamic teachings might be spread under the guise of Islamic education, thereby requiring strict supervision and control on the part of state institutions.

POLITICAL PARTICIPATION & REPRESENTATION OF ROMA

The Bulgarian Constitution prohibits the existence of ethnic parties and all political associations must be open to citizens from all ethnic and religious communities. There are no measures for positive discrimination (in effect, Article 6 of the Constitution prohibits all privileges or restriction of rights on the grounds of ethnic self-identity among other criteria), and therefore no quotas or reserved seats for Roma neither in central nor in the local government, even though the Roma constitute 4.9% of the country's population and are exceptionally underrepresented in politics. A large variety of Roma political parties have been established over the years, but they have had a modest electoral success (mostly at the municipal level).

Research has suggested that **Bulgarian citizens of Roma origin display a low interest in politics mostly due to conditions of extreme poverty, low education and a (well justified) belief that no political party is interested in improving their situation.** In effect, it has often been evidenced that many Roma voters prefer to trade their vote for short-term practical benefits, which sometimes include the illegal practice of selling votes in exchange for money or other material gifts.

Overall, the practical situation can be described as tolerant. While there are no measures of positive discrimination to compensate for the disadvantaged position of the Roma community, there are also no barriers to their participation in the political life. The right of Roma to take part in the political processes is not questioned, although there are occasional calls to restrict the right to vote only to people who are functionally literate or who pay taxes (which could potentially disqualify many Roma voters). **There is a widespread conviction within public opinion that it would be beneficial not just for the Roma community but for society overall if more educated, influential and capable Roma individuals were elected to positions in the central and local government, but that there are too few such representatives of the Roma community to really make a difference.**

A general impression regarding the public discourse about the place of Roma in the Bulgarian political life is that it is neither intolerant nor tolerant – it is marked above all by indifference.

VOTING RIGHTS OF BULGARIAN-TURKISH DUAL CITIZENS

The new Election Code of 2011 has restricted the right to vote on local elections only to those citizens who have had a present residence address in the Republic of Bulgaria at least six months before the date of conduct of the elections. According to the information from the Central Direction “Civil Registration and Administrative Services” (CRAS) at the Ministry of Internal Affairs, 444,749 people were erased from the voters’ list for the October 2011 local elections on grounds that they have their present address abroad.

On paper, these measures affected all Bulgarian citizens regardless of their ethnic origin and thus cannot be considered as discriminatory on ethnic grounds. However, there is a question of discrimination based on place of residence, as those voters living (or simply travelling to) non-EU countries were substantially more likely to end up being erased from the voters’ list and thus unable to exercise their right to vote. The government and the parliamentary majority, which passed the Election Code, did little to hide their belief that those citizens with a too strong affinity to Turkey should be kept away from the ballot boxes. **The consequence of this rather intolerant legal arrangement is that in addition to disenfranchising a significant mass of voters, the new regulation also intensified interethnic distrust and tensions.**

Overall, the Election Code and the restrictions it introduced were met with barely concealed approval. For years, many Bulgarians were openly dissatisfied with the strong influence of the Movement for Rights and Freedoms (MRF; party supported by Bulgarian minorities and the one benefiting most from the votes cast by Bulgarian citizens residing abroad, and mainly in Turkey) in Bulgarian political life. The expression that “the MRF has overeaten with power” had become a cliché regularly used to express the opinion that the party plays an allegedly too powerful role not just in the politics but also in the economy. Thus, **many welcomed a law which prevented Bulgarian Turks who reside in Turkey from taking part in at least some of the elections** (the restrictions are valid only for local elections and elections for the European Parliament).

The Election Code and other political acts of the governing GERB party, the rhetoric and activities of the nationalist parties, and the growing intolerant public dispositions in the country aroused fears and anxieties within the Muslim community that the Communist-era repression and assimilation policies could be repeated. The result of all these factors was the **souring of interethnic relations in Bulgaria over the past couple of years.**

CONCLUDING REMARKS

The evaluation of discourses and practices of intolerance, tolerance and respect in Bulgaria presents a rather gloomy picture. This is especially true for the public discourses and dispositions, as a previously rather tolerant attitude towards diversity and otherness is quickly evaporating, opening space for expansion of intolerance.

An even more worrying development is that intolerance is not limited only to the discursive level. In two of our four case studies, intolerant practices are the norm rather than the exception, while in the third case study, tolerant practice is being marred by still sporadic, yet increasing in number incidents of intolerance.

The institutional and legal settings are a mixed blessing. The arrangement in the area of education can rightfully obtain a high mark and be considered as respectful and accommodating. The main problem is in its flawed implementation as the good intentions more often than not remain only on paper. The legislation in the political arena is openly intolerant towards diversity and otherness. It is also a perfect confirmation of an unfortunate and rather depressing axiom: while transforming a tolerant and respectful legal framework into tolerant practices and public dispositions is an exceptionally long and strenuous process, intolerant practices and discourses can lead easily and quickly to intolerant legislation.

FURTHER READINGS

To read more on the research findings presented here, see:

Tolerance and Cultural Diversity Discourses in Bulgaria

By Marko Hajdinjak and Maya Kosseva with Antonina Zhelyazkova (IMIR)

Download your copy from:

<http://cadmus.eui.eu/handle/1814/23257>

Other relevant publications include:

2012/02.2. Handbook on Tolerance and Diversity in Europe

Anna Triandafyllidou (EUI)

Download your copy from:

<http://www.accept-pluralism.eu/Research/ProjectReports/Handbook.aspx>

	PROJECT IDENTITY
Acronym	ACCEPT PLURALISM
Title	Tolerance, Pluralism and Social Cohesion: Responding to the Challenges of the 21st Century in Europe
Short Description	<p>ACCEPT PLURALISM questions how much cultural diversity can be accommodated within liberal and secular democracies in Europe. The notions of tolerance, acceptance, respect and recognition are central to the project. ACCEPT PLURALISM looks at both native and immigrant minority groups.</p> <p>Through comparative, theoretical and empirical analysis the project studies individuals, groups or practices for whom tolerance is sought but which we should not tolerate; of which we disapprove but which should be tolerated; and for which we ask to go beyond toleration and achieve respect and recognition.</p> <p>In particular, we investigate when, what and who is being not tolerated / tolerated / respected in 15 European countries; why this is happening in each case; the reasons that different social actors put forward for not tolerating / tolerating / respecting specific minority groups/individuals and specific practices.</p> <p>The project analyses practices, policies and institutions, and produces key messages for policy makers with a view to making European societies more respectful towards diversity.</p>
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Coordinator	European University Institute, Robert Schuman Centre for Advanced Studies
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